

Press release: embargoed until 00:01 hrs, Wednesday, September 2

British Educational Research Association

Many teenagers still not sure what Diploma courses offer

Many English teenagers either still know nothing about the Government's controversial new Diplomas for 14 to 19-year-olds or have concluded that they are a less attractive option than A-levels, a new study suggests.

In April the Government announced that Diplomas had passed a "crucial tipping point" and predicted that 40,000 pupils would be registered to study for the new qualifications from this month. By September 2010 the qualifications, which combine academic and practical learning, would be offered by more than 97 per cent of local authorities.

However, two surveys of Year 11 pupils (15 and 16-year-olds) in the South of England have revealed that most do not regard Diplomas as a viable route into higher education or employment, the British Educational Research Association conference will be told today (September 2).

Researchers at the University of Reading surveyed pupils in 11 secondary schools at the beginning of the 2008-9 academic year and conducted a follow-up survey in seven schools just before the GCSE examinations earlier this summer. The majority of the 412 pupils who answered the first questionnaire knew only that Diplomas were a type of qualification. One in ten pupils thought they were equivalent to university degrees.

The second survey, which involved 212 of the same pupils, showed that they had become slightly more aware of the new qualifications. However, a quarter of them still had no idea what Diplomas were. Many pupils thought that they were a less demanding alternative to A-levels but less than a quarter of those surveyed said that they would consider studying for a Diploma.

When researchers questioned pupils in three schools at greater depth they discovered that the teenagers saw the Diploma as a practical, vocational qualification. "Our survey strongly suggests that while A-levels remain they are the qualification of choice," says the study's lead author, Elizabeth McCrum.

"Many pupils are deterred from the Diploma because they perceive it to be specifically related to particular jobs rather than more broadly to certain types of careers. The introduction of Diplomas in Humanities, Languages and Science may go some way towards emphasising the relevance of the qualification to a wider range of occupations."

The authors of the University of Reading research paper, "Vocational education and training: some perspectives from Year 11 pupils", are Elizabeth McCrum, Tony Macfadyen, Carol Fuller and Andy Kempe.

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Notes for editors:

1. The first five Diplomas, in information technology, creative and media, health and social care, construction and the built environment, and engineering, were introduced in September 2008. From this month, 10 Diploma subjects are available, and by 2011 there will be 17. Designed in partnership with employers and universities, the Diploma aims to lead on to either further study or to work. The Foundation Diploma is equivalent to 5 GCSEs at grades D to G, the Higher Diploma equates to 7 GCSEs at grades A* to C, and the Advanced Diploma is equivalent to 3.5 A-levels.
2. Some of the schools covered by the University of Reading surveys do offer Diplomas, at least in consortia with other schools, if not on their own sites. However, the school-based Diplomas tended to be on offer only to Year 9 pupils last year in the areas surveyed. In 2008-9 the more advanced Diploma courses were generally being delivered not by the schools surveyed but by their local FE colleges.
3. This University of Reading team's research formed part of a larger study (funded by the lifelong learning network Progress South Central) which explored the Information and Guidance on post-16 options that Year 11 pupils receive. Data were collected through two questionnaire surveys and from focus group interviews. Some schools were lost from the second wave of data collection because they allowed GCSE candidates to remain at home on study leave. Focus group interviews -- involving a total of 23 pupils -- were also carried out in three of the participating schools in the summer term.
4. The annual conference of the British Educational Research Association is being held at the University of Manchester from Wednesday, September 2 to Saturday, September 5. About 700 research papers will be presented during the course of the conference. The conference programme can be accessed via the BERA website <http://www.beraconference.co.uk/>